

Reshaping Space and Time in Morocco: The Agencification of Urban Government and its Effects in the Bouregreg Valley (Rabat / Salé)

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Since the turn of the new century, urban mega-projects became a new growth strategy in Morocco. Yet, in contrast to their utopian promises, urban mega-projects do not solve the contemporary urban crisis in the region, but reproduce it in different ways. A paradigmatic case is the Bouregreg project in the valley between Rabat and Salé. This article considers the ways in which this megaproject represents a means to extract profits and priva-

tize public wealth, but also how it represents an urban laboratory for the development of new modalities of government, control, and domination. Finally it assesses the social impact of the project on small-scale farmers and private land-owners.

Keywords: Morocco, urban government, neoliberalism, new state spaces

Battles are fought against the encroachments of a central authority and state pressure. But we know that the real problems lie elsewhere, that the most important decisions are made elsewhere. (Lefebvre 183)

From the terrace of Café Maure in the casbah of the Oudayas, one can enjoy the panoramic view of the Bouregreg Valley (figure 1). The 12th-century citadel is built on the rocky shore where the Bouregreg River flows out into the Atlantic Ocean between the Moroccan capital Rabat and its neighboring city, Salé. Especially on summer evenings, the riverbanks look full of life. Jet-skiers are taking off, men are fishing, families are strolling along the quay, teenagers are diving in the water, and ferrymen take you across the river from one shore to the other.

The valley is surrounded by the remains of Morocco's rich past: the casbah, the Hassan Tower, the Mohamed V mausoleum, the medinas of Salé and Rabat, and further into the valley, the Chellah, a fortified medieval necropolis. Each one of these sites has become an important tourist attraction. Yet, the estuary attracts not only tourists, but also real estate investors. A whole new urban center is arising on the shore of Salé right across the casbah, with



Figure 1: View on Bouregreg

1,700 new residential units, a new marina, luxury hotels, retail facilities, bars, and restaurants. La Marina Morocco, as its Abu Dhabi developer Eagle Hills calls it, has become a new luxury hub for living, leisure, and entertainment. But that's not all. A new bridge (Pont Moulay Hassan) now connects the two riverbanks. Together with two tramlines, a tunnel underneath the casbah, and a brand-new belt highway further along the valley, these state-of-the-art infrastructures improve mobility between two cities plagued by traffic congestion.

The most remarkable feature of the valley's transformation so far is situated right behind the bridge. The ongoing construc-

tion of the Grand Theatre, designed by the late "starchitect" Zaha Hadid, will become Rabat's newest landmark. The fluid sculpture form of the theater, inspired by the movement of the river itself, symbolizes the capital's own aspiration for a "Guggenheim effect" (Rodríguez et al). It is the cornerstone of an urban renaissance that aims to turn a dull administrative city into a top-notch cultural destination – for now, at least. Only a few hundred meters from the construction site of the theater, billboards already announce another landmark endeavor: The Mohamed VI Tower, a 55-storey skyscraper. The deal to build Africa's tallest tower, which was announced in the summer of 2017, is a multimillion dollar partnership between

the Moroccan real estate company Travaux Généraux de Construction de Casablanca (TGCC), headed by Othman Benjelloun, one of Morocco's most influential entrepreneurs, and China Railway Construction Corporation (CRCC).

These future material icons of showcase urbanization are part of a long-term project that stretches fifteen kilometers inland along the Bouregreg River up to the barrage Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah. Launched in January 2006, the Bouregreg project encompasses a territory of six thousand hectares and will be developed in six different phases (figure 2). The first two phases are currently underway.

The developments in Bouregreg Valley are a salient example of a broader process of economic and political transformation that embodies the reign of King Mohammed VI ever since his accession to the throne in 1999. Under his impetus, the launch of urban megaprojects and large-scale infrastructural works came to characterize a new development strategy, an "urbanism of projects" (Cattedra) or a "new culture of projects" (Barthel and Zaki), trying to link networks of investment capital in Europe, Africa, and the Middle East and if possible Asia and the United States. This new development strategy

should also be situated within larger entrepreneurial shifts in which megaprojects become the cornerstones of the current spatial re-organization of globalization (Brenner and Theodore; Harvey; Massey). Mega-projects are considered key for the commercial redevelopment of urban centers and the promotion of the city's "unique selling position", both in the Global North (Flyvbjerg) and the Global South (Ren and Weinstein), and more specifically the Arab region (Wippel et al.).

What matters here are not just the material changes in the urban landscape, but also how these projects reveal new political practices and agency that materialize in the interplay between global capitalism and local places such as Rabat and Salé. Cities like Rabat, but also Casablanca and Tangiers, became the privileged vehicles of economic regeneration and capital accumulation, as well as testing grounds for the re-invention of (authoritarian) politics and urban government (Bogaert). In other words, the transformation of the Moroccan city tells a broader story about the transformation of politics, the state, and the economy within a context of globalization and neoliberal reform. In this article, we question some of the promises and logics behind Morocco's urbanism of projects. On the one hand,

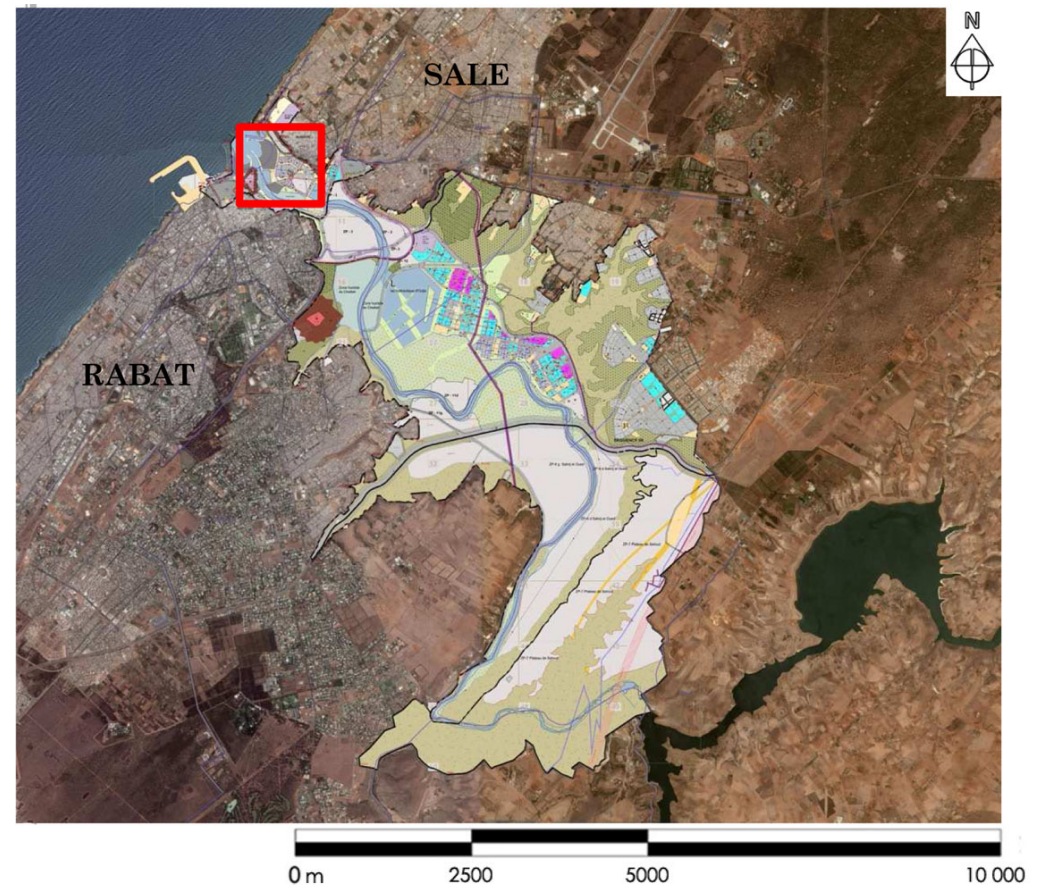


Figure 2: The Bouregreg Project

they can be a site for the production of new political imaginaries, future aspirations, and expectations of social justice (Strava). But more often, they produce new forms of social exclusion and feelings of marginalization. Our examination first analyzes the new institutional and govern-

mental arrangements that emerged within the context of the Bouregreg project. Second, we want to draw attention to the expectations and concerns of some of the people who live in the valley and reflect on their relations with the project.

This article is based on joint ethnographic fieldwork and expert interviews with officials and other stakeholders conducted in April and July 2018. It also draws on findings from earlier fieldwork between 2007-2013 (Koenraad) and 2014 and 2018 (Maryame).

New state spaces and ad hoc urbanism in the Moroccan capital

To realize the Bouregreg mega-project, the Moroccan authorities created a new institutional model of state power: the Agency for the Development of the Bouregreg Valley. Law 16-04, which created the agency in November 2005, gives the agency exclusive authority over the project within its legally defined territorial boundaries (the six thousand hectares). Within that territory, local governmental entities such as the prefectures, the local municipalities, and the Rabat-Salé Urban Planning Agency are effectively sidelined. The Bouregreg Agency is authorized to develop zoning plans, organize public inquiries, provide public infrastructure, allocate land for construction, deliver construction permits, regulate all deeds of sale, and expropriate private land deemed necessary for the advancement of the project. All state-owned land was transferred to the agency free of charge.

The agency functions as a quasi-state within a state.

This particular form of neoliberal statecraft is a salient example of what Neil Brenner has termed "new state spaces" (Brenner). It implies not just a rescaling of state power (i.e., from the national to the urban scale), but also a whole new assemblage of power by which foreign actors are integrated in the decision-making process. The Bouregreg Agency operates as an intermediary between various investors from around the world and the Moroccan context. It not only attracts investors such as the Abu Dhabi investor Eagle Hills (first phase) and the sovereign wealth fund Wessal Capital¹ (second phase), it also gives them decision-making power. As a semi-public entity, the Bouregreg Agency is allowed by Law 16-04 to set up private enterprises and create joint ventures with private investors. Not surprisingly, plans, goals, and strategies are adapted regularly within the institutional and legal framework of the project in order to better serve the interests of foreign investors.

Three examples can be given. First, before the official launch of the project, a Royal Commission assembling all kinds of experts and policy-makers drafted a 165-page plan that can still be consulted on

the official website of the Bouregreg project. Especially the first phase, now La Marina Morocco, was worked out in detail and the Commission anticipated the construction of a central, open, and green public space in front of the medina of Salé, where inhabitants of both cities could come together, stroll, and picnic. It was important, the commission stated, that the new public place would be "planned with less density than the shore of Rabat to allow a larger variety of uses by the population of the city" (Royaume du Maroc 40). Eventually, as an official of the Bouregreg Agency admitted, the whole plan was revised and the building site was densified to increase the profitability of the private investor.² Where they once planned a public park, there is now a gated community.

Another example can be given with regard to the second phase. Originally, this phase was going to be developed by Sama Dubai, before it defaulted in 2008 due to the financial crisis. Sama Dubai had planned a luxurious residential islet that was dubbed Amwaj (the waves) and subdivided – Venetian style – into smaller waterways. Residents would be able to reach their villas by boat. The Amwaj project was eventually replaced by the Grand Theatre, financed by public money, while

a new investment fund was contracted (Wessal Capital) to urbanize the zone around it. What is striking, however, is that several officials of the Agency confirmed to us that the partnership with Sama Dubai was a mistake from the very beginning. The all seemed to agree that Morocco did not need megalomaniac Dubai-style residential projects like The World or Palm Jumeirah. Some of these officials were relieved that it had failed. When we then asked one of them why the agency had accepted the deal with Sama Dubai in the first place, despite the seemingly general consensus that it was a bad idea, he answered, “Well, what do you do when somebody comes with a check for two billion dirhams.”³

A final example relates to the later phases, which are still in their conceptual phase. Again, according to officials from the Agency, several factors (i.e., considerable delays in the first two phases, the saturation of the real estate market, and the opposition of small landowners) played a role in the decision – for now – to plan the urbanization of these phases for the long term, in partnership with local inhabitants and with less density than originally planned. Nevertheless, a lot can change in the future, as an official stated:

In ten years we can always revise the urban development plan (*plan d'aménagement*). For example, because of the demographic pressure. For now, it's the current plan that works for us. But you never know whether there will be new opportunities. It's the market actually that dictates the planning.⁴

Urban planning and government are thus subject to fluctuations in the market and become more accountable to investors than to the citizens who actually live in the zones under development. Even if local governments in a country such as Morocco were to become more democratically accountable, democracy itself has been short-circuited by institutional arrangements like the Bouregreg Agency. Authority in the Bouregreg Valley is thus the result of a particular relational configuration between local, regional, and international actors (Allen). This does not mean that power and authority are slipping away from the traditional power center in Morocco (the regime, the monarchy), only that central state power has been reconfigured and reassembled so that it is now entangled, negotiated, and shared with other forces (e.g. Gulf capital) to pursue common interests within a rapidly changing global context.

As a result, urban planning in the valley seems to evolve quite ad hoc, answering to specific – but also contingent – market problems and solutions. In an interview with an official of the Urban Agency of Rabat-Salé, which is responsible for the coordination of urban planning in the whole metropolitan area, he lamented, “The Wilaya (the governorate) does its best to assure a coherent vision (on urban planning), but how do we reconcile this with the Bouregreg Agency, which seems to escape from everything. It's really another country”⁵.

The Bouregreg Agency is not an exception. For each specific development problem there seems to be the need to create a specific governmental entity or new state space. Over the past two decades, we have seen the establishment of several similar state agencies within the domains of urban planning, industrialization, tourism, etc.. Some examples are the Marchica Med Agency in Nador, Casablanca Finance City Authority, and Tanger Med Special Authority. There seems to be a general strategy to take all large development projects and government dossiers out of the hands of conventional and elected state government institutions in favor of an “agencification” of public policy (García and Collado) and the increas-

ing dominance of “technocratic structures” loyal to the palace (Hibou and Tozy). This has been a trend not only in Morocco, but also in many different urban development settings all around the world (Ong). Moreover, urban mega-projects, such as in the Bouregreg Valley, also symbolize a fundamental shift in Moroccan authoritarianism. Whereas Hassan II ruled with an iron hand during the *Years of Lead* (*les années de plomb*), Mohammed VI seems to rule via holdings, funds, and specialized state agencies (Bogaert).

Stuck between different “times”: life in a valley under construction

The following analysis of our field notes does not strive to be exhaustive, only to point out some aspects of the social impact of the project that are not obvious at first glance. While others have focused on those populations that were directly affected by La Marina Morocco, the first and most advanced phase of the Bouregreg project (Mouloudi), we want to draw attention to those people living in areas that are not yet under development. More specifically, we focused on the small farmers, gardeners, and other inhabitants of Oulja, a large agricultural plain and wetland integrated in phase three of the project, and the people of Sidi Hmida in the district of Hssain in phase five. Our goal is

not to map the conditions of the entire population affected by the project, only to reframe the agency’s own promoted values of citizenship (*citoyenneté*) and sustainable city planning.

It’s important to know that between the launch of the project in 2005 and the publication in 2009 of the *Plan d’Aménagement Spécial* (PAS), a complete zoning plan for the valley, the Bouregreg Agency suspended all private (land) transactions except those done by the agency itself. After the publication of the PAS, no land can be sold or bought without the permission of the agency. Legally, the agency also has the authority to expropriate any private land within its designated zone at a fixed price determined by the value of the land in 2005. This creates a particular situation. Those who still own private land in the valley cannot really bring that land into the market. Land prices are de facto locked by the Bouregreg Agency.

The agency explains this as follows: as a financially autonomous semi-public entity, the agency’s business model depends on revenue generated in the first phase to finance the second phase, and so on. In other words, the Bouregreg Agency depends on the surplus value created on public land and/or expropriated land in

one phase in order to advance to the next phase. This revenue model is by its very character a gradual process. One cannot market all available land at once, because that would create oversupply and possibly a rapid fall in land prices.

From the point of view of the inhabitants who live in those areas still “under development”, this produces an uncomfortable standstill. While the direct impact of the megaproject is clear-cut and visible for those people who live in the surroundings of La Marina Morocco (e.g. through expropriation, gentrification, the privatization of public space, etc.), it is much less so for those who live deeper in the valley. This doesn’t mean, however, that they are less affected. All they seem to be able to do is wait for the project to arrive. In the meantime, they cannot really get on with their lives. Most of them don’t know what will be in store for them. Many people we talked to, especially in Oulja, told us that they were left completely in limbo.

During one of our visits to Oulja, we met with the owner of a small tree nursery. He took over the business from his parents and had lived in the valley all his life. But since the launch of the project, he doesn’t really know what the future will bring. Will he be able to stay? Will his tree nursery

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have a place in the project? Or will he have to leave?

I cannot even plant extra trees to expand my business, because the agency wouldn't allow it and I wouldn't be compensated for the extra trees if the moment comes that they expropriate me.

The price he would get for his land was fixed at 250 Moroccan dirhams per square meter, less than 25 euros.

With that kind of money you cannot find something suitable in the city. Besides, I don't want to live in the city. I want to keep my tree nursery. But where else will I find a plot of land this close to the city and this fertile? Not for the price we'll get. There are no other lands in the proximity of Rabat where you can dig up water at five or six meters.⁶

But not everybody living in this area is a private landowner. We also met with a family of peasants who cultivated Habous land in the valley.⁷ They have already been there for several generations. The head of the family had worked the land all his life and now he shared it with his seven sons and their families. "This is *Ard Jdidna* (land of our grandparents) and we don't want to

leave this place".⁸ However, all Habous land was taken over by the Bouregreg Agency, and the family did not know what was going to happen to them once their land would be subject to development. They told us that the Ministry of Habous even stopped accepting the families' rent for the usufruct of the land. Their fate was now in the hands of the agency, they felt.

Power inequality and social hierarchy can be understood here through the different use and experience of time. The Bouregreg Agency has time. Time that many of the inhabitants of the valley do not have. Thus, the agency and the inhabitants of the valley are operating in different time frames, with one side dictating a particular time schedule conforming to its own interests, while the other side tries to cope with that schedule's effects of uncertainty and distorted temporality. It's logical that a mega-project of the magnitude of the one in the Bouregreg Valley unfolds over a timespan of several years and even decades. Moreover, given its revenue model, it is obliged to take the time necessary to anticipate (better) market opportunities and developments. In the meantime, the inhabitants might be – quite literally – stuck there for another five years, maybe ten, who knows, even fifteen before the project reaches their spot.

People like the owner of the tree nursery or the small peasant family feel that they cannot go somewhere else, but at the same time, they also feel they cannot really build a life in the valley, either. On every issue, for example building permits, renovation permits, electrification, access to water or sewerage, they have to deal with the Agency. Actually, many inhabitants in the area lack access to drinking water and have no connection to the sewage system. But given their "temporary status" within the timeframe of the project, the agency does not seem to be willing to provide these people with what they need. Many inhabitants feel powerless.

When we address the *caïd* or the *mqad-dem* (the local authorities),⁹ they all say that we have to talk to the agency," another of our interlocutors told us. Many feel that there is not much they can do. "Fighting against the agency is like fighting the ocean. You cannot stop it."¹⁰

Not everybody in the valley, however, resigns himself to the omnipotence of the Bouregreg Agency. In Rabat and especially Salé, associations such as Sala Al Mustaqbal, Ribat Al Fath, and Association Bouregreg have tried to negotiate with or put pressure on the Bouregreg Agency, albeit not always successfully (for more

details see Mouloudi). This fits within a longer history of substantial growth of associational life in Morocco, more particularly in cities, and especially since the 1990s when the Monarchy allowed more political scope for maneuvering and tried to reconfigure its relations with a growing urban middle class (Abouhani).

Also in Sidi Hmida (integrated in phase five), a neighborhood that experienced an influx of urban middle-class and even upper-class residents in recent decades (Amarouche), inhabitants have organized to influence the direction of the project. At first sight, social class status and personal networks seem to make a difference here, unlike with the inhabitants of Oulja.¹¹ When people in Sidi Hmida heard about possible scenarios for their zone, some of them, mainly those with a middle class background, founded an association. One of the members of the association, who used to work for the Ministry of Agriculture and now owns two tree nurseries, stated that they actually managed to convince the Bouregreg Agency to redraft a new master plan for their specific zone. "It was thanks to this association, which was founded mainly by public executives, physicians, and army colonels, that we managed to put pressure on the agency to change her plans".¹² Moreover, although

his personal situation was in many ways similar to some of the people we met in Oulja (he could not sell his property and the agency could still always expropriate him), he seemed much less pessimistic about the future.

It's true we are governed by the agency, the municipality has no business here. But that doesn't bother me. The agency is better organized. It's easier to talk to them than with a bureaucratic state apparatus (...). The agency consists of serious people. Much more competent than those at the municipality.¹³

Time, space and the broader political significance of urban planning in Morocco Urban planning can serve as an interesting lens to understand changing relations between citizens and political authority, including by producing different temporalities. A mega-project such as the Bouregreg project produces a particular temporality influenced by schedules, plans, market demand, delays, etc. and by expectations of (future) profit and value. But due to the particular legal situation created by Law 16-04 and the specific characteristics of ad hoc urbanism, the project enforces a quite different experience of time upon the actual inhabitants

of the valley, who are, to be clear, not considered part of the project. Their time experience is reduced to a condition of waiting (for the advancement or delay of the project), often with limited possibilities for a way out. If the whole purpose of the Bouregreg project is to create a form of "progress" – based on promises of economic growth, better infrastructure, environmental protection, and even the protection of historical heritage – the particular situation in which the inhabitants of the valley are kept actually precludes their very efforts to make progress in life.

This is closely related to a broader political significance. The changing nature of contemporary Moroccan politics is hidden within the relational complexes of power that produce urban mega-projects such as the Bouregreg project. In the process, the city itself is turned into a privileged vehicle for capital accumulation and speculation, while at the same time, decision-making processes are breaking loose from more conventional political entities. The process of agencification in Morocco entails that decisions about the future city, and hence, also about the future of millions of urban citizens, have been increasingly concentrated in exceptional governmental zones like the Bouregreg Valley and entrusted to

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new state agencies that share power with and are made accountable to global capital, resulting in decisions made *elsewhere*, outside the scope and boundaries of the national state or the regime.

The Bouregreg Agency, as a new state space, involves a deeply political move to dispossess both public and private land and bring the Valley into the global circulation of capital in a way private investors could never do on their own. Massive public funds are mobilized for infrastructural improvements (the bridge, the tunnel, the tramway, etc.) and for the creation of new landmarks (the Grand Theatre), most likely to improve primarily the attractiveness and profitability of urban land and real estate projects.

Yet, will these efforts also benefit the majority of citizens in Rabat, Salé, and their outskirts? The truth is that the Bouregreg mega-project is not just a wasteland being renovated, developed, and/or preserved, as it is often presented in official communication. It represents the creation of a globalized space, one that opens up and reaches out to the rest of the world, i.e., to foreign investors, tourists, and cosmopolitan consumers, while at the same time drawing new social, economic, political,

and spatial boundaries between those who can afford it and those who cannot.

Notes

¹ The multinational fund consists of Moroccan capital and money from several Gulf countries.

² Personal Interview, September 2013.

³ One Euro corresponds to approximately 10 to 11 Moroccan dirhams, Personal Interview, April 2018.

⁴ Personal Interview, April 2018.

⁵ Personal Interview, July 2018.

⁶ Field notes, July 2018.

⁷ Habous is an Islamic legal institution of religious mortmain property. The property is administered by the Ministry of Habous. Usufruct can be granted to farmers, for example, often in return for a form of rent.

⁸ Field notes, July 2018.

⁹ The caïd and the mqaddem are representatives of the Ministry of the Interior on the city and local neighborhood level. They are part of a parallel power structure in Morocco, loyal to the Monarchy that exists alongside elected government bodies.

¹⁰ Field notes, July 2018.

¹¹ This is our hypothesis based on preliminary fieldwork. More empirical work needs to be done.

¹² Personal Interview, July 2018.

¹³ Personal Interview, July 2018.

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